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**A Semblance of Firm Earth**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

### **A Semblance of Firm Earth**

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Abstract: This thesis follows the thread of characters becoming other flora, fauna, and inanimate objects in an effort to evade the gaze of their play cohabitants, their audiences, and the historical reinforcements of their bodies on stage. In an examination of Community Garden, I locate instances of these bodily transformations to find ways in which my theatrical work can become a source of healing and offer an opportunity to seek healing through the beautiful.

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the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
the thing itself and not the myth  
the drowned face always staring  
toward the sun  
the evidence of damage  
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty  
the ribs of the disaster  
curving their assertion  
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.

*Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck"*

## INTRODUCTION: BODY LOGIC AND FABULATION

Mothers become lizards. Dubious men disappear underneath lion carcasses. Children become dolls, ingredients for a soup. Husbands become immortality-giving fruits. These instances of metaphysical transformation occur across my body of plays. They happen out of necessity, out of heartbreak, out of evasion, out of sacrifice, out of terror. Across the work, characters are malleable materials living in surreal landscapes—places where their interiority becomes externalized either by measures of their own or by the will of others.

This thesis focuses on two structural elements of my work—bodily transformation and fabulation—that peak in my culminating play of graduate school, *Community Garden*. My interest in seeing these elements play out in my work is rooted in historically fraught depictions of personhood and bodies on stage. The problem is personal. All too often I’ve watched Black women walk about the stage as objects of trauma rather than full people. They are used in so many plays as avatars through which white audiences can cleanse their sins against them. And this is a historical trap.

To define these elements, I look to foremothers of Black feminist theoretical framework Jennifer Nash and Saidiya Hartman. In “Writing Black Beauty,” Nash argues that the language through which Black feminist writing communicates is through beauty. She writes, “contemporary black feminist theory has mobilized the beautiful form as a strategy for theorizing loss, insisting that loss is only knowable through a proximity to beauty” (Nash 104).

Black women’s bodies have been a myth of theatrical language since the pre-colonial. Stolen from their personhood, they have been exhibited as science objects for study, spectacle, and medicinal experimentation. On stage, a Black woman is an image loaded with historical



implications of centuries of voyeurism. The purpose has been shrouded in different language over time—to confirm all of our fears about savages living on that continent look like; to signify laziness, asexuality, or rampant sexual energy; to strike fear about the monsters that may come and eat your children; to be the guinea pigs that test for poison and make birth control and vaccinations safe for white people. Today, a Black woman on stage is an opportunity for audiences to cleanse their souls of all that trauma they have previously inflicted on the Black women who did not have a choice about what their bodies meant to others. They still do not have that choice.

The images are disturbing. Art of any kind poses an opportunity to violate its subject in order to gain status as serious work and toward its audience in order to mark the easiest path in ensuring they feel something. The theatre I see reflects a Black woman's body which is always already scorned, traumatized, steeped in inherited pain from their mothers and violence from their fathers. The theatre mutilates this woman to gain access to her insides, a scientific tradition of the spectacle. There is no future for her because she cannot revivify from the operating table from which she is displayed. And yet the theatre I see proposes that only through the violation of her, of me, can the audience heal from the wrong they've inflicted upon her. It supposes that we cannot move forward unless we move further into the myth of the wreck rather than cope with an image of the wreck itself. I wondered why the myth was always more tantalizing than the true self, though it didn't take long to discover that it was only the pain of my being that could be taken seriously, and it is easier to fabricate this pain than to contend with a true thing, its horror and its simultaneous joy.

When the pain is made up in the imaginations of people who are not the signified, they too are cleansed. They are off the hook because they have, at least, a self-awareness of the ways in which they have been evil to the body they wish they could understand. They want to understand it so that they save it, to save it so that they can be released of the pain they have inflicted upon themselves by violently tearing the fact of human from these humans. When a human who is not a Black woman sees one on the stage, they are relieved. The wall is up. They do not have to interact with the body they are watching. They can watch for an entire 2 hours a Black woman living both as actor and character on the stage, perhaps the longest they have ever been able to watch this activity uninterrupted, without rebuke for wanting to see and know the body in its existence. And even relieved that by the end of the hours, they can return to their life, having experienced something like catharsis or true empathy for that body which was otherwise unknown to them.

The closest thing to breaking this myth I have ever seen is *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury. But what is depressing is that even a work in which the Black humans on stage call a fantastical attention to the narratives and myths running in the minds of the white audience members cannot undo yet another level of myth it necessitates. It builds every time because we cannot live without the myth that those bodies are here for us. An unusual callout of this desire only doubles down the desire down. The audience needed the writer to make known that we were disgusting voyeurs out loud, and now we can all leave the play space cleansed like never before.

This can all be extrapolated onto other categories of “character.” The sense that by witnessing the actions of a character on stage feeds our human belief that we could ever know,

predict, or presume anything about anyone we encounter. The presumption a character is a full human rather than a device employed in every arbitrary way to further a plot or theme or sensation contributes to the audience's desperation for their journey to have all been meant for them. These people would not exist or matter if we did not sit in the theatre to watch them.

This generates a myth that we have done something by being here together, by simply witnessing the Black woman on stage. In thinking a character in the play can be "knowable" in the span of an hour and a half, if we only stay awake to see their plight on the heroic journey, then we can wrap them up and tuck them away neatly when we no longer have the need to feel empathetic. If the sickness becomes diagnosable, perhaps that means there is a cure at the end of the tunnel. Under such fraught circumstances, how do these characters and the actors playing them evade the disease? Time kept happening but we were not and couldn't be changed by it. Change without change, invariance under transformation—the definition of symmetry according to physicists. The Black women I have seen on stage inevitably transform their ugly historical notions because they are not indeed ugly, yet the myth of their trauma remains in the viewer who loves to see it play out again and again.

But there are histories of the women who flee from this gaze.

Fleeing the rape of Apollo, Daphne turned into a laurel tree. Fleeing a life enslaved, Sethe kills her Beloved. Fleeing a life of being otherized, Medea kills her sons. The work of Saidiya Hartman offers an antidote to this broken archive, critical fabulation. Harman defines this as the what if, her "scholarly practice to make productive sense of the gaps and silences in the archive of trans-Atlantic slavery that absent the voices of enslaved women." In *Lose Your Mother*, she interlaces these archival gaps in the experience of Black women with speculative narrative about

what might have been. What choice do we have in giving ourselves histories but to place our current selves in the storied past? This is another key element of my plays—a speculation on what might have been for the women in my life as they existed in a world that did not see them as only holding the capacity for victimhood.

The intersection of Nash's *beautiful writing* and Hartman's *critical fabulation* can oddly enough be strung together by Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of absolute beauty. In *Being and Nothingness*, he writes that "beauty represents an ideal state of the world, correlative with an ideal realization of the for-itself" (Sartre 194). In other words, beauty is the experiential space where the self and all that is exterior collide. He goes on to theorize that our innate desire to see beauty in the world is linked to our innate desire to see ourselves as capable of knowing beauty. Another foremother of speculative self-fabulation, Toni Morrison, writes in her essay "The Price of Wealth, the Cost of Care," "art invites us to take the journey beyond price, beyond costs into bearing witness to the world as it is and as it should be. Art invites us to know beauty..." (Morrison 333). And as beauty lives at the intersection of the world and our selves, art invites us to know something about who we are and self-fashion in context of that beauty.

In the writing process as well as the production process of *Community Garden*, bodily transformation and speculative fabulation aid in dismantling the ugly historical visions of personhood, womanhood, and particularly Black womanhood on stage, and rebuilds her image as beautiful (in the Nash and Sartrean senses). This beautiful woman knows suffering as well as joy and is not defined by merely one or the other. She evades a sense of duty to the audience's guilt by refusing to be an object of their cleansing rituals. She plans out the steps of the ritual for her own transformation.

## ORIGIN OF THE GARDEN

“I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.”

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

In the final summer before leaving a city where nature was scarce and lasting community often scarcer, I had the great fortune to meet a new friend who invited me to a community garden in the Bronx. It was a magical space, the biggest garden I had seen in the city. It was a space where the people who lived down the block educated their community on growing practices and gave bundles of fresh food for free to those in need.

It was a special kind of gift to receive this just months before leaving the city, a beautiful way to remember it by. It felt good to harvest greens that would nourish people that I may never meet. It felt good to go home and cook a meal with my friend from the vegetables we had just pulled out of the ground. The experience immediately planted a seed into my brain, one that I would not write for another year, but would materialize as a play about a woman who rediscovers her self-worth by visiting a peculiar garden and encountering a community of women who help to remind her of it.

*Community Garden* pulls more directly from my personal life than any of the other works I have written. Its atmosphere and setting is inspired by my personal experience with the beauty and magic of that garden in the Bronx, and its narrative content comes from my experiences with both of my grandmothers. They are two Jamaican women I have looked up to as models of feminism without ever uttering the word. Yet as they have grown into their 90's, they have

shown me a side of them I did not see as a child. Perhaps they were always this way and I only now have the lens to see it. Despite an otherwise perfect health that should carry her well past 100 years old, one grandmother no longer eats over the grief of losing her husband years ago. Cooking decadent meals that have nourished me and others her whole life, she has solidified into a person who must make sure that everyone else is fed before she is. When I last visited her I made her a large breakfast and adamantly made sure she was served her plate first, only for her to let her husband pick off her plate while he was waiting. I have sent books and journals and pens for them to remember that they have thoughts worth expressing, lives worth being archived. Yet each time I call, they say they haven't cracked a single book or penned a single word. I am offering them the same care they have taught me to give. They constantly reminded me that I have great things ahead and that my stories, ideas, and thoughts are meant for the world to see; however, when the lens shifts to their stories, ideas, and thoughts, they see them as worth little and at times even shameful. The story of how my grandmother brought her children out of poverty is to me inspiring and magical, to her, a shameful reminder of the conditions in which she used to live.

These are not the women I grew up with. They once taught me strength and the importance of having dignity in oneself. They were the first women in their small Jamaican communities to drive cars. They helped other mothers deliver the children that populated our little world in Sandy Bay. They took me on walks around the yard and named all the fruit trees on our path, tasking me with climbing them in order to get the guavas we would make into juice later. Moments like these in my childhood are the most beautiful ones of my life—the perfect

Sartrean cross between the natural world and how my grandmothers have come to know themselves in it.

The decline of self-worth is troubling. I fear for their well-being and I fear that I am doomed to the same fate. I mull over whether the ways we torture ourselves is hereditary. Despite my current independence, will I one day lose myself in a life I've made with a partner who merely sits in the background waiting to be fed? Will I model for the young women in my life that it is okay to stop eating or doing anything for yourself because your supposed only reason for life has left you?

I cannot pretend to know what it is like or what it might do to have lost someone that you've spent nearly every day of your life with. Everything I believe and research supports the idea that women forever have expressed their inner creativity through whatever means they could in whatever life circumstance they might have been in. We have models for this, however misunderstood their work may have been in their respective eras—Phillis Wheatley, Virginia Woolf, the Brontës, and countless others. But what of the women who never receive acclaim for their poetry? Whose poetry exists instead in the everyday expression of love toward their children, the blankets they knit, the bedtime stories they make up? These women are the “artist[s] who left [their] mark in the only materials [they] could afford, and in the only medium [their] position in society allowed them to use” (Walker 239). Where is the archive of these women, and if there is not one, how might we fabulate their tales, draw their cartographies so that they can perhaps know and see themselves in beauty?

All these questions coupled with the love for the women I revered my entire life came to be the seeds from which *Community Garden* bloomed.

In *Community Garden*, a woman in her third act named Colleen happens upon a garden in her neighborhood she has never noticed before. She doesn't get out much as most of every day of her life is in dedication to her terminally ill husband, Sanford. At this garden she encounters three seemingly young women, Belle, Alex, and Cammie. Belle is a pusher, Alex is living in the clouds, and Cammie is clearly wrestling with some deep inner conflict that puts her at odds with Belle and her wife Alex. Through a round of scenes with each woman, Colleen's worldview and dedication to Sanford is consistently challenged through the different methods of her scene companions. Through Belle, Colleen questions her notion of one's duty to her lifelong partner and recalls passions that could fill her up if she let them. Through Alex, Colleen recognizes that she could float up into the sky and find ecstasy in the mundanity of being human. Meanwhile, Cammie disapproves of Belle and Alex's undertaking of Colleen, fearful that they will force Colleen into making a life-altering choice for the worse.

Behind the scenes, the garden women, who we coined the "eternals" in the production process, are debating a much grander and astrological dilemma. These women make human sacrifices to the garden, and by eating the fruits that grow from the graves, they attain immortality. They spend their days tending the garden and listening for signs of its hunger. When a plot of the land starts to decay and Colleen wanders in immediately after, Belle sees this as a sign that she must be the next person to provide this sacrifice. As the women learn that she has a terminally ill partner who is holding her back from living out the rest of her days with fullness and joy, they subtly work to entice her to eventually sacrifice her husband at the end of the play and join them in immortality. Cammie does not want Colleen to make this choice. She has been reflecting lately on whether she made the right decision. She loves Alex, but she



wonders if the sacrifice she has made was the wrong choice, if a life that never ends is worth living.

In a culminating garden feast, Belle explains the origin of this magical garden.

**BELLE**

Colleen. I want to tell you a story.

There were once two women. Who loved each other very much. A kind of love that only comes to you once in a lifetime. It wasn't a selfish love. It was pure and full, but it was hated. They lived during a time when it wasn't okay for women to love each other out in the open. And what's worse, they were each married.

**ALEX**

Belle?

**BELLE**

The women lived next to each other all their lives. Secretly meeting in a special place hidden from the world, living their regular lives with their husbands, their *families*, out in the open. One of the women grew tired of having to love in the dark, but she loved the other woman so much that she'd do anything she asked. So in the dark they met. They grew old like this. And one of them even grew to be very sick. The other woman saw a way out. She could whisk her love to the countryside, where women often went when they were sick to live out their days in such a place that their husbands and children did not have to watch. But her love said no. She so feared people would discover their desire. She told her no. She would rather live her days out in the shadow than be with the woman. And she died. But the woman left her a secret. She requested to be buried in their special hiding place. Everyone came to the funeral and mourned the loss, never knowing what kinds of little blessings of love ever occurred on the land they stood on. The woman was so distraught, she could not return to the grave, to their special place, for years. She, in fact, never returned until she neared the end of her life. She came to the hiding place, hoping that if she slept there long enough, she would die there and rest her soul next to her lover's forever. When she came upon the grave, she found that a tree had grown in its place. A pomegranate tree. She ate its fruit. She couldn't believe how lovely it tasted, like the freshest fruit in the world. She ate and ate until she grew so tired she fell asleep right underneath. When she woke up, she had returned to a self she hadn't seen in...in a very long time. And she lived on in this young body, cursed to remember forever the life she could not have.

Cammie returns to the garden in a decayed state having decided that it is far scarier to cross the threshold into the ultimate unknown—death—than it is to live a never-ending, mundane life with Alex in the garden. Colleen decides to sacrifice her husband to the garden once and for all, leading her husband gently into a grave and joining the women for an eternal life.

## BODY AS CARTOGRAPHY

“Soul is the place,  
stretched like a surface of millstone grit between body and mind,  
where such necessity grinds itself out.”

from *The Glass Essay* by Anne Carson

This play naturally became an opportunity for creating cartographies not only for the characters but also for navigating a life built upon sacrifices and questions of selfhood. One map for my understanding of how beauty could connect the body to the natural world was *Ordinarily Sacred* by Lynda Sexson, a philosophical book about the ways in which objects gain a status of sacrality. It includes a parable about a woman who recognizes her inherent tie and relationship to the universe given limited access to it. This passage was yet another inspiration for how I bridged these ideas about a woman’s, or my grandmothers, knowledge of the world through the innate state of her own body to the play:

The first time, it may have been the first, a man named John, wearing an animal-skin shirt, turned toward Mary his wife. She was wearing a blue gown she had colored herself from berries. The stain held more tenaciously to her hands than to the cloth. “I can’t get it out of my hands and I can’t get it to stay in the cloth.”

“Mary,” he said, “I have a dream that does not leave me. So I must leave here.”

Mary, who had neither word nor concept for map, looked at the dark-dyed lines in her hands and imagined them as the furrows of her garden, recalling the parsley next to the onions. But then she saw those stains as the roads John would walk and the rivers he would have to wade. She feared the places her palm took her, on to the home of the bloody Saracens, and back to the walls of Eden. Then she saw, under her second and third fingers, inked stars; and she saw that the roads in her hand circumscribed God’s whole universe. She turned to John, but he had already gone.”

Lynda Sexson, *Ordinarily Sacred* (48-49)

Mary, my grandmothers, and Colleen of *Community Garden* may not have the technical language for why the onions grow better one season over the next, why the guavas that look like that make a sweeter juice, or how to manage the grief of the disappeared or deceased husbands. Their bodies are all the language they need. *Community Garden* is about returning to the body to find that language. And as Colleen rediscovers the language of her body, it is a dream space through which my grandmothers can, too.

So where did I and my collaborators invite beauty in the craft of this play, in its development process?

“Pretty little butterfly, what do you do all day? Roam around the sunny sky with nothing to do but play. Nothing to do but play all the livelong day. So, fly butterfly, fly butterfly. Don’t waste your time away.” (*Community Garden*)

The above text is a song that I long believed my grandmother made up—only to recently discover it’s a common nursery rhyme in Jamaica—and sang to me as a child in order to help me fall asleep. I sang it to my sister when she was still little to help her fall asleep. Colleen sings this song to Belle in a moment where she is compelled for the first time to be vulnerable. Throughout the play, poetry has been budding as a shared language between these two characters, a way they relate to each other where their own language fails. They reference William Carlos Williams’ “This is Just to Say,” Chaia Heller’s “After Language,” and Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”

These are some of my favorite poems, and they become loaded segments that further the plot and invite the characters to share beauty in a hanging space between them. Functioning in some way like a jukebox musical, these poems are a shared dialogue by the characters as well as the audience, either pulling from their previous knowledge of them or inviting them to widen

their literary net. An observation of Toni Morrison's that I have held dearly is a guide for my work, "art invites us to know beauty" (*The Price of Wealth, the Cost of Care*). For me, it is not only the art itself that may be beautiful, but perhaps its relation to an artistic tradition can open up avenues to know a beauty that transcends what I have written.

Each poem shared comes at a point of critical vulnerability for the characters. "After Language" is Belle's greatest extension of herself that she ever makes toward Colleen in the play despite being veiled through language she has not written herself.

When all the drowsy metaphors  
about women and fruit  
have been peeled  
and devoured;

there's just you, me  
a bowl of summer peaches,  
two parentheses  
with nothing in between  
(just space)  
for the tongue's imagination

Chaia Heller, "After Language"

Belle recites this poem to Colleen from an anthology called *My Lover Is a Woman: Contemporary Lesbian Love Poems*, edited by Lesléa Newman in return from an earlier conversation in which they bonded over their knowledge of "This is Just to Say." It is highly suggestive of the tension between these women. It cuts their tension with a knife by saying what they are too afraid to say in their own words. Much like characters who break into song when regular old speaking can't do the trick anymore, these characters break into poetry.

But they also break into song.

Music was an element of this work that developed during the rehearsal process. In discussions about how the ritual of these women's sacrifice could turn into theatrical language, my collaborators and I found space and gathered talents to give each character, including the garden, their own theme. These songs come in moments of grief, ritual, and when notating spaces of disconnect between characters. When they are connected, their harmonies are in sync, but when, for instance, Alex and Cammie start to pull away from one another, we know it first through their inability to harmonize in their entrance to the garden before we ever get it in their clashing dialogue.

In the final moment of the play, after Colleen has made her choice to sacrifice her husband to the garden and enter an eternal life with the women of the garden, she is replaced by a younger self during a ritual transformation played by a younger actor. The opening song sung by the eternal women makes a reprise, and the play comes to a close.

Poetry and song became as abundant in our rehearsal process as it did in the play. Our director, Kristen Osborn, encouraged the whole team to share favorite poems during each rehearsal. Despite having rehearsal on zoom, through this practice we gained a shared language that connected us spiritually. Trading poems with one another centered our practice and brought us closer to the play in terms we found outside of ourselves. Through the poetic language and materials of other artists, we created a language of our own. Our language became one based in a culture of abundance, where language had an infinite power of expression. It also became a practice of grounding, wherein, like an actors' warm up, the group honed in on a singular voice delivering beautiful text that tuned our ears to listen closely for resonance, tone, and sonority in language.

Through this expression and culture of sharing, the poetry also became a tool to check the temperature on how the actors were relating to and processing the play. In our three-week zoom table read process, Kristen and I encouraged the actors to bring themselves to the table as much as they wanted in order to help inform the life of the characters. We created an atmosphere of open dialogue that encouraged everyone in the metaphysical space to be present and to be artists. It is through this encouragement of artistry and the tapping into beauty on the level of the individual that the play began to grow.

For three weeks of rehearsal, we combed meticulously through the play as a group. At any point, any member of the team could raise questions, comments, half-formed thoughts, really anything that so moved them. In my younger years, a process like this would have been debilitating. I would have felt like an insect crawling under a bright hot lamp, ready for dissection. But after a few years of consistent practice, I've gone from once thinking of this kind of experience as absolute painful scrutiny to now seeing it as generous and necessary heat. Our shared language of poetry made it easier to hear where my collaborators were coming from.

Throughout the play, the eternal women encourage Colleen to share these beautiful parts of herself. She is uncomfortable with this throughout, but each woman is persistent in their desire for Colleen to see herself as a whole person without the shadow of the life she's spent with her husband. Significantly, Sanford is not explicitly abusive or even mean to Colleen in any way, which points to a truth that one does not need to undergo serious trauma in order to accrue years of low self-esteem. It is precisely in her devotion to her husband that she develops a loss of the self. Things have only declined rapidly as the constant care for Sanford in his ill state has made Colleen see herself even less as a person and more as a caretaker, someone who is doing

everything right to ensure that the man that has given her so many wonderful years is taken care of. In a sense, she is never doing anything wrong; however, it is easy to fall into the trap that one can only be one thing when one is consumed on a daily basis by one task. Colleen is a kind of stand-in for the people like my grandmothers who have given so much of themselves to others that they have forgotten to leave anything for themselves. Belle says to Colleen,

“I’ve seen this before. I’ve seen people living, never thinking they deserve greater than what they have. And they let every little excuse keep them in that place. They give all their limbs and organs away before realizing there isn’t a body left. It’s paradoxical, but you have to take care of yourself in order to be able to take care of others.”

*Community Garden*, pg. 25-6

In each scene, Alex and Belle create moments of beauty for Colleen, reminding her that while beauty is subjective, what is important is that we do not forget the importance of the subject, or the self, in that equation. They each employ different strategies to convince Colleen—Belle utilizes their shared love language of poetry while Alex imposes her flighty and weightless attitude to get Colleen to imbue beauty and lightness within her own body.

The eternal women frequently insist on listening to the body and the garden in conversation with one another to map out their next steps. Like Mary in Sexson’s parable, they don’t have language for why they manage to maintain their garden and its life-giving properties. It is only known to them by their intuition, the charting of experience by trial and error. Though Belle purports to be this fearless leader who knows all about what they should do and what the omens of the garden mean, she is going on a feeling.

**BELLE**

Don't worry. Everything will be fine. I can feel it.

**ALEX**

Do you really have that feeling? Or are you just being...you.

**BELLE**

My feeling is never wrong.

*Community Garden*, pg. 56

For Belle, feeling and knowing are one and the same.

But this perfect picture of mapmaking through intuition and the body is only an ideal. Even in Eden, the snake lurks, waiting for knowledge to crack the veil of innocence. The play examines the pitfalls of this poetic fabulation of a female utopia through the character Cammie. Toni Morrison posed a framework for which to think about utopias in a PBS interview discussing her novel *Paradise*. She says, “The isolation, the separateness, is always a part of any utopia. And it was my meditation, if you will, and interrogation of the whole idea of paradise, the safe place, the place full of bounty, where no one can harm you. But, in addition to that, it's based on the notion of exclusivity. All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is *not* there, by the people who are not allowed in.” No character in the play embodies this rumination on utopia better than Cammie. Her wife and dramatic counterpart Alex may operate as though this eternal life in the garden could not be more perfect, and yet she holds so much doubt over whether it is a choice that anyone should be subject to. Life in this garden for her is *not* beautiful, but a cloud of false optimism and deep selfishness. Despite hating the life she left behind to join Alex and Belle, she wonders whether she would rather have briefly lived a life she did not love than live forever in a life she constantly questions the ethics of. In some way, being certain about one's distaste is a more comfortable position than the uncertainty of what a life of everlasting utopia might look like.

If Alex is a vision of what it might mean to lose one's grounding in reality in the pursuit of beauty, then Cammie is the antithesis. She is a character who struggles to give over enough of



herself to that pursuit and therefore has difficulty seeing the benefit. She is the voice in your head that asks whether you did anything to deserve happiness when it falls into your lap. She is the realist who knows there is no such thing as perfection because even to achieve it would mean to exclude other possibilities of joy and, as established, one way of being is only one in an infinite sea of ways.

The play does not purport any designation of what way is “right.” Though Cammie returns, one gets a sense that she is the only person in the play who does not get what she wants, her journey of self-discovery complicated by the fact that by betraying the garden she will inevitably wilt into dust. Though Colleen ultimately sacrifices her husband to the garden, a draft more suited to an indoor theatre space included an epilogue that troubled the notion of whether she was ultimately satisfied with that choice. This version of the play ended with Colleen eating from the tree that sprouted from her husband’s grave and finding a worm in its fruit, indicating that paradise, or at least Colleen’s vision for it, has been tainted.

## THE MECHANISM OF TRANSFORMATION

"all of our enduring experiences touch upon and pass through everything, Sidie, through life and death. We must live in both, be intimately at home in both...for is life really more demystified and safely entrusted to us than that other condition? Are not both conditions in a place namelessly beyond us, out of reach?"

Rainer Maria Rilke in a letter to Sidonie Nádherná von Borutín, 1913

In the plays I've written thus far, moments of transformation from the human form to that of another animal mark scenes of evasion. In a departure from my usual mechanisms of body change, *Community Garden* captures transformations from the human form to flora, from the mortal body to the immortal. This kind of shift in my theatrical language sprouted from the desire to use these metaphysical transformations to now dramatize not just person-to-person conflict, but the inner grappling of the characters. Needing to rid herself not just of the laborious burden of caring for her husband, Colleen relieves herself of the belief that she could not be an entire person without him by putting him in the grave. Colleen is not running from her burdens, rather she is utilizing them for her transformation to a better self.

It is not a terribly mythical process. Human bodies decay like any other organic matter and services in the real-world compost bodies in the service of giving life to trees. The bodily transformations in *Community Garden* signal the natural life cycle of the human form. In the pivotal moment where Colleen realizes that she must bury her husband alive, she recalls a line from "Song of Myself." Upon being asked what the grass is by a child, the poem's narrator remarks, "it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves" (Whitman). The narrator goes on to muse on if they had known the bodies from which the grass grows, they would have loved them.

That what has become of them is a sprout that “shows there is really no death” (Whitman). Much like in my creative process with my collaborators, Colleen comes to know the meaning of her actions through the language of poetry. Her sacrifice of Sanford is not malicious, but an act of beauty that situates itself adjacent to loss.

Colleen’s sick husband is played by a puppet resembling a potato, a heavy vegetable she must carry around and support on her own. There are versions of this play where he could be not a puppet, but a sack of actual potatoes. In other versions, Sanford can be played by a human that never speaks. Regardless of the measures taken so that he embodies the physical burden Colleen must bear, Sanford is buried in the end, a weight shed and made anew by the magic of the soil.

The garden exists as a literal character—not just atmospheric, but the embodied sacrifice of Belle’s lover in her mortal life. A woman she loved in secret during her mortal life requested to be buried in the sacred hiding place they made for one another, and from the grave grew a tree bursting with pomegranates. In Belle’s grief of her lost love, a love that could not safely exist under the circumstances of their era, she returns to the grave and eats from the tree. Her satiety lulls her into deep sleep in the garden and when she wakes up, she is returned to a young, unaging image of herself. Though Belle’s lover could not publicly entertain her love for Belle in life, her body became a sacrifice, knowingly or otherwise, for Belle to live long enough for the world to change and grow more accepting of a life she could live in the open with someone new. Though Belle never found the person to fill that lack, she lives patiently.

My rumination on what occurs to the body after death in this play presents a version of life where we might be nourished by our past rather than brought down by it. Each woman in this play knows deep loss, but through their consumption of it they come to know beauty. This is not

to say that youth equates to beauty—it is their interior that must transform in order to earn immortality. In conflict with a selfish Cammie, Belle says, “you cannot be in this life without ridding yourself of what's troubling you in your old one.” Experience and abundance are gained by the transformation of loss into something beautiful.

## CONCLUSION: WHERE MAPS LEAD

“Although I steeped myself in an incredible amount of reading material, it merely expanded the void, fattened the darkness inside the cactus...”

Yumiko Kurahashi, *Ugly Demons*

*Community Garden* encapsulates much of what I came to graduate school to learn and speak about. I desired an opportunity to learn how a production process might work and was overwhelmed by a team who was open to participation in a warm, poetic, and healing space. The table work process pushed me to a limit that taught me about a process of revision that I hoped to push myself to. I am ultimately proud of the work that I and all of my collaborators have brought to make this play serve the intentions I set out to accomplish. Despite the great instability of my time in school, the experience of my first production healed a lot of my uncertainty about whether my writing could do justice to my friend who first brought me to the garden in New York or, more importantly, my grandmothers who I hope can one day see the play.

There is unfinished business. There are remaining questions I have about how my work can better express this thin and evolving space that is my identity and its relation to the people around me. *Community Garden*, for all of its mysticism and magic, feels straightforward. The metaphors are obvious and the source lives in a place that is familiar to me. But my work usually tends to refuse polish. I discovered in the production process that I miss something about the vitality of beautiful messes, work that is less heavy-handed in its metaphor and is borne simply of sensations that are less focused. My next steps are to discover how in the process I can maintain some delightful incoherence that keeps plays alive.

There aren't established roadmaps or plans I have for this progress, but I've learned by living briefly through the *Community Garden* characters and trusting in my sources that it's through doing that the blueprint becomes clear. In the play I find the most heat in currently, *Oh, Sweetheart*, I wrote every day for 3 months and at every possible step I read the play out loud as I wrote it. I felt that I was walking through a foggy maze each day guided only by the sound of my own voice echoing among the walls. When the play was finished and read aloud in a workshop, I realized how much I should have trusted that each step I took was following the one before it. My voice was the map drawing itself as it spoke through things bubbling under my surfaces. The play explores similar themes of personhood, trapezing from scene to scene in which Black women are searching for a new language so that they may break from a world that uses language to imprison them.

I don't know what comes of the plays or what comes next. I don't know whether I've solved the history of violation. My tension is that I never want to know. A solution would be beside the point, only perpetuating the false firmness of "knowing." I want to just keep going with this somewhat aimless joy in discovery.

Community Garden

by

Renae Simone Jarrett

"all of our enduring experiences touch upon and pass through everything, Sidie, through life and death. We must live in both, be intimately at home in both...for is life really more demystified and safely entrusted to us than that other condition? Are not both conditions in a place namelessly beyond us, out of reach?"

*-Rainer Maria Rilke in a letter to Sidonie Nádherná von Borutín, 1913*



## **PROLOGUE**

In a lush garden—

The audience enters the space and takes their seats as three eternal women tend the garden.

They are out of sync. Over time, their actions become in sync. Their humming voices culminate into a sweet lullaby.

Two of the women exit together, carrying a basket of goods.

## **PART ONE**

Alone now is BELLE (20s). She digs a little hole in a patch of dirt with her hands, continuing her song.

She jumps back at a frightening sight. The hole is teeming with worms.

She looks at the hole. She picks up a worm and watches it wriggle in her hand. She drops it back in the hole. She covers it back up with dirt.

She sits on a stump and begins to deskin some fruit from her basket. She hums again, a more disturbing tune.

COLLEEN (70) enters. She is wearing brand new gardening gear.

**COLLEEN**

That's a beautiful song.

Belle jumps.

**COLLEEN**

Sorry, did I startle you?

**BELLE**

What?

**COLLEEN**

Oh no, I startled you.

**BELLE**

Oh. No. I was just...in my head.

**COLLEEN**

What song was that?

**BELLE**

Oh. Something I made up.

**COLLEEN**

It was beautiful.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

I'm Colleen.

**BELLE**

Hi Colleen. My name is Belle.

Colleen reaches out to shake hands.

**BELLE**

I just touched worms.

Colleen chuckles. They don't shake. Colleen looks around.

**COLLEEN**

Anywhere?

**BELLE**

*(pointing to the wormy spot)*

Try that spot.

Colleen sets down her bag and takes out some tools and seed packets. She works the soil, fumbles with uncertainty.

**BELLE**

You're new at this.

**COLLEEN**

You could tell?

Belle chuckles.

**BELLE**

We don't get new people often.

**COLLEEN**

Really? But it's so full.

**BELLE**

It's a little hidden.

**COLLEEN**

I like hidden things.

**BELLE**

How'd you find it?

**COLLEEN**

I've been taking long walks. I wandered nearby the other day and thought it could be nice to try something new.

**BELLE**

So, you want to join us?

**COLLEEN**

Us?

**BELLE**

The collective.

**COLLEEN**

I'm not sure. I've always wanted to work with my hands like this. You know when there's something you always say you're gonna do but you don't?

**BELLE**

Yeah-

**COLLEEN**

I figured, why not just do it for once?

**BELLE**

Huh.

**COLLEEN**

So. Here I am.

**BELLE**

Here you are.

**COLLEEN**

And I don't have a clue what I'm doing.

**BELLE**

*(laughs)*

I can see that.

**COLLEEN**

Are there classes here?

**BELLE**

You just kinda learn along the way.

**COLLEEN**

Oh. Great.

Noticing Colleen's worry.

**BELLE**

Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it.

**COLLEEN**

I've got a brown thumb.

**BELLE**

Plants are more resilient than people give them credit for.

**COLLEEN**

I'm a chronic overwater-er. I just want to feel like I'm doing something to help but then I guess...  
I'm a kind of helicopter plant mom.

**BELLE**

You don't have to do much here. The soil is very good.

Belle bites a piece of fruit. Juice runs down her hands.

**BELLE**

You know the rules, right?

**COLLEEN**

Rules?

**BELLE**

First rule of the co-op, never talk about the co-op.

Colleen, confused.

**BELLE**

*(laughs)*

I'm kidding. Haven't you read that book?

**COLLEEN**

Oh. I don't think-

**BELLE**

It's from Fight Club. They made it into a movie, too.

**COLLEEN**

Oh.

**BELLE**

It's okay if you don't know it. It's kind of terrible. Really gratuitously masculine.

Quiet.

**BELLE**

But no, the actual first rule of course is don't eat anything you haven't planted.

**COLLEEN**

Yes, I've heard // that one.

**BELLE**

It's kind of the only rule.

**COLLEEN**

Good to know.

**BELLE**

I planted these. So I can eat them.

**COLLEEN**

How long do you think until I can eat something I've planted?

**BELLE**

I've been here a really long time. You need a little bit of patience.

**COLLEEN**

Hm. Patience. Right. I can do that. Patience is a virtue. I'll make patience my // middle name.

**BELLE**

Patience includes letting silence sit between people.

**COLLEEN**

I'm sorry! I didn't mean to be so talky. Part of my helicopter personality. Gardening is supposed to be very relaxing. I sorta hoped it would help.

**BELLE**

You don't need to apologize.

Belle offers Colleen a piece of fruit.

**BELLE**

Breaking my own rules.

**COLLEEN**

Oh. Thanks.

Colleen takes a bite into the fruit.

**COLLEEN**

Wow. It's so cold. Like it's been in the fridge.

*(chews)*

Forgive me, they were delicious, so sweet and so cold.

**BELLE**

What? I offered it.

**COLLEEN**

No, it's from a poem.

Belle thinks.

**BELLE**

Oooh. The Williams. The icebox.

**COLLEEN**

Yeah. That's the one.

You're a little young to be into poetry, no?

**BELLE**

Anyone can be into poetry.

Belle continues to peel.

**BELLE**

Where do you live, Colleen?

**COLLEEN**

*(pointing)*

A few houses down that way.

**BELLE**

Oh. I live-

*(pointing in a different direction)*

-not too far over there.

Practically neighbors. I'm going to make this into jam. Why don't I bring a jar over to you?

**COLLEEN**

You're so generous.

**BELLE**

It's kind of nice to be old fashioned like that, isn't it?

**COLLEEN**

Old fashioned?

**BELLE**

I don't get out much other than to come here. I never meet my neighbors.

**COLLEEN**

But I'm sure many of them come to plant here.

**BELLE**

Like I said, we don't get that many visitors.

**COLLEEN**

Do you own this garden?

**BELLE**

Sort of. There aren't many of us, so we all have our responsibilities.

**COLLEEN**

I can't wait to meet the others. I don't get out much either.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

Belle.

**BELLE**

Colleen?

**COLLEEN**

Do you live with anybody else?

**BELLE**

*(laughs)*

Like a roommate?

**COLLEEN**

Yeah, or, are you married?

**BELLE**

No. Just me.

**COLLEEN**

That must get lonely.

**BELLE**

I find ways to occupy my time.

**COLLEEN**

What do you do for a living?

**BELLE**

You're a little nosy, Colleen.

**COLLEEN**

Just curious! I'm sorry.

**BELLE**

It's okay. It's not usual for people to live alone in this neighborhood, these big houses.

**COLLEEN**

Frighteningly big when there's no one to share it with.

**BELLE**

Not so scary to me. I like my space.

I've lived around here a long time. My parents left our house to me.

**COLLEEN**

Oh god, you've lost your parents? I'm so sorry.

**BELLE**

It was a long time ago.

**COLLEEN**

Still. I had a lot more time with my mom and it still wasn't easy. How could it ever be?

**BELLE**

Really, I'm okay. I enjoy being on my own. And I have all these babies right here in this garden. I get to plant them myself and watch how they grow.

Quiet.

**BELLE**

Are you alone, too?

**COLLEEN**

No. I'm married // but-

**BELLE**



Do you love your spouse?

**COLLEEN**

That's an odd question. Of course.

**BELLE**

It's not an of course. You sound a bit lonely.

**COLLEEN**

Why would I be married to someone I don't love?

**BELLE**

People do it all the time.

**COLLEEN**

I'm not "people." I'm just a woman who loves her husband, I guess.

**BELLE**

How long have you been married?

**COLLEEN**

Uh.....I stopped counting after 30.

**BELLE**

Age 30?

**COLLEEN**

Year 30.

**BELLE**

Whoa. And you *still* love him?

**COLLEEN**

I mean, the years have their ups and downs.

**BELLE**

I suppose under the right circumstances, love is eternal.

**COLLEEN**

I agree.

**BELLE**

Tradition. It's very...holy.

**COLLEEN**

You're right. We all have our holy passions.

**BELLE**

You can't get more holy than a garden. Adam and Eve.

**COLLEEN**

Right! And it's *such* a lush garden. Very biblical.

**BELLE**

Yes. It is.

Colleen tills the soil with a little tiller.

**COLLEEN**

This is nice.

**BELLE**

Yes.

**COLLEEN**

It feels so good.

**BELLE**

It does. You seem like you're easing into it.

**COLLEEN**

The conversation makes it easier somehow. Like I'm not even thinking about it. Just *doing*. I like this.

**BELLE**

Good. You'll grow plenty of beautiful things in no time.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

Normally I'd be sitting at home, staring out the window. Doing nothing.

**BELLE**

Oh?

**COLLEEN**

My husband Sanford requires a lot of attention. I'm pretty much joined to his hip.

**BELLE**

That does not sound ideal.

**COLLEEN**

I'm mostly used to it.

**BELLE**

I'm assuming you're retired?

**COLLEEN**

I was fortunate to never have to work, actually.

**BELLE**

Fortunate?

**COLLEEN**

I know how it is now. Stay at home wives are frowned upon.

**BELLE**

*(chuckles)*

A little.

**COLLEEN**

But I don't see anything wrong with my choice. It was just as much of a choice as anyone's choice to work.

**BELLE**

It's a little hard for me to see it that way.

**COLLEEN**

*You're* here in the middle of a weekday. Do you work?

**BELLE**

I, uh, work from home.

**COLLEEN**

Cushy.

**BELLE**

It can be a harder skill to learn. Self-discipline. You really have to have intrinsic motivation to be able to do this sort of thing.

**COLLEEN**

I guess I can see that.

**BELLE**

What's yours?

**COLLEEN**

What's my what?

**BELLE**

Your intrinsic motivation.

**COLLEEN**

*(fumbling)*

Oh. Uh. Like I said, I'm sort of dedicated to my husband right now. Sanford.

**BELLE**

He doesn't work either?

**COLLEEN**

He's...not at his strongest.

**BELLE**

Oh no, I'm sorry to hear that.

**COLLEEN**

It's okay.

We sit together and I make sure he's comfortable. I mean. I love him. So. It doesn't bother me. He would do the same. If it were me. I think. He. I. Yeah. It isn't as monotonous as it sounds.

**BELLE**

I can't pretend to know what all that is like.

**COLLEEN**

Something came over me the other day. I was looking out the window from the chair. As we do. And then I stood up and watched people walk by. Just stood right up out of the chair. Really looked at them as they passed. I tried to see their faces, hear what they were saying on their phone calls, to their walking partners, whatever. Then I realized I could see them better if I went out there myself. I felt this urge to walk out there. The first time I felt that urge I walked to the end of my street and back. But each time I go a little longer. Aimlessly. Sometimes I'd bring a book hoping to find a little bench I could read on. Sometimes I'd just think. About so much. Sometimes my mind would go blank and I wouldn't even realize what I was doing. Like autopilot. And one of those days, the other day, I snapped out of it and I was in the garden. I had no idea how I ended up in here. No one else was around. I found my way back home and thought...I want to go back there. I. *Need.* To go back there.

Quiet.

**BELLE**

It can be very tempting.

**COLLEEN**

Even if it means being with Sanford a little bit less.

**BELLE**

Maybe it's something that can actually give you purpose.

**COLLEEN**

No, it's not that. I told you I already have purpose.

**BELLE**

Purpose isn't about other people. That's compassion. Purpose is about something in yourself.

**COLLEEN**

Yeah? What's yours?

**BELLE**

The garden.

**COLLEEN**

That's external, too.

**BELLE**

It isn't.

This garden means the world to me. I mean it literally goes into my body. But there's something about what my body gives to it, too. It's a connection that's secret and has nothing to do with anybody else. It's a lifeline.

**COLLEEN**

But there are other gardeners.

**BELLE**

They're great. But people are never as reliable as nature. The seasons come and they stay a while and they go. And you always know when that's going to happen. You know that if you put a little life into the ground, you'll get a little life out.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

*(quietly)*

I don't think I've ever had something like that.

**BELLE**

But you can now. Look at you. Here. In this space for nobody but yourself. You're making something grow outside of yourself. You're part of something, now. Don't you want to be?

**COLLEEN**

*(hesitates)*

Yes.

**BELLE**

Then let yourself.

From outside of the space, the voices of two eternal women get closer. One tries to get the other to harmonize with her, but it isn't quite working.

ALEX (20s) and CAMMIE (20s) enter. They've got a laughing, flighty air to them. They are dressed for rugged work yet are freshly manicured/bathed/moisturized. Like Belle, they have abnormally long hair of different textures.

Colleen instinctively stands up.

**BELLE**

Alex, Cammie! Meet the newest member of our garden. // Colleen.

**ALEX**

Wow! You're so cute!

**CAMMIE**

Babe, that's totally rude and belittling! I'm Cammie, please excuse my wife.

**ALEX**

I'm not trying to be rude! People can be cute. And you are! I'm Alex. What was your name?

**COLLEEN**

*(befuddled)*

Colleen.

**ALEX**

Colleen! I'm trying to be better about names.

Alex and Cammie sit in the dirt and harvest greens into canvas bags.

**ALEX**

Colleen? Colleen. Colleen. I think I've got it.

**COLLEEN**

*(getting it wrong)*

Alex and Cammie.

**BELLE**

No, opposite.

**COLLEEN**

Oh, excuse me!

**ALEX**

So cute! It's fine.

**COLLEEN**

So, how long have you two been together?

**CAMMIE**

4 years.

**ALEX**

// 10 years. // 4 years.

**CAMMIE**

4 years.

**COLLEEN**

4 years?

**ALEX**

Time, schmime. It still feels like it was yesterday.

Tense quiet.

**COLLEEN**

What're you harvesting?

**ALEX**

Collard greens. Want to try some?

**COLLEEN**

Oh. Shouldn't it be washed first?

**ALEX**

No! We don't use anything here you'd have to wash off. Au naturel.

Alex hands Colleen a leaf.

**COLLEEN**

Strong smell.

She hesitantly eats it.

**COLLEEN**

Whoa.

**ALEX**

Isn't it the best most leafiest deep green you ever tasted?

**COLLEEN**

I'd have eaten my vegetables if this is what they tasted like.

**BELLE**

I told you, the soil here is really special.

Alex and Cammie share a look.

**ALEX**

We're so glad you're here, Colleen. Colleen! I remembered!

**CAMMIE**

Why'd you come here?

**ALEX**

Tone, Cammie.

**CAMMIE**

I mean. How'd you find the garden?

**COLLEEN**

Oh. I just kind of wandered and here it was.

**ALEX**

How serendipitous.

**BELLE**

Colleen's thinking of joining us.

**ALEX**

Like forever! Oh my gosh!

**COLLEEN**

It's only my first time here, I don't want to get ahead of myself.

**ALEX**

*(feelings hurt)*

Oh.

**CAMMIE**

It's okay, Colleen. You don't have to decide right now.

**COLLEEN**

I've never done anything like this before.

**CAMMIE**

Busy job?

**COLLEEN**

Actually I was lucky. Never had to worry about working in the official sense.

**CAMMIE**

You were a stay-at-home mom?



**BELLE**

*(aside)*

A // thankless job.

**COLLEEN**

I never had kids.

**ALEX**

Oh, wow! All time to yourself!

**COLLEEN**

I'm married. Just didn't do the kid thing.

**CAMMIE**

Oh.

**ALEX**

Still. I bet you've gotten so much out of life on your own like that.

**COLEEN**

Um. I guess I did.

*(quiet)*

It's nice to see you two doing something like this together. My husband Sanford would never come with me, too much dirt.

**BELLE**

Oh. He can't.

**COLLEEN**

What?

**BELLE**

It's a womxn only space.

**COLLEEN**

Oh! I didn't know! That could've been embarrassing. If he ever *did* decide to join me.

**ALEX**

*(laughs)*

Yes, it would've.

**COLLEEN**

Why is it women only?

**CAMMIE**

It's just safer that way.

**COLLEEN**

...are men not safe? I mean, in a gardening capacity?

**CAMMIE**

*(sarcastic)*

All these dangerous tools...

**ALEX**

What she means is, we have all kinds of stress all the time because of men watching us. This is just a place we can come to make something, just for us. No judgements. No hierarchy. Just the dirt. Growing. Foods. Life!

**COLLEEN**

Hm. I get that.

**CAMMIE**

We don't exactly get a lot of men who want to join anyway.

**COLLEEN**

Right, right. Gardening is woman's work.

**CAMMIE**

Unless of course you're getting paid to do it.

**ALEX**

Right. But we don't believe in that here. We share. We don't exchange money. It's about a connection to the earth and to each other.

**COLLEEN**

It's like a dream.

Cammie stands up.

**CAMMIE**

Well. I think we've got enough for dinner tonight. Time for us to get cooking.

**COLLEEN**

Oh, wow! Straight from farm to table, literally! What's for dinner?

**ALEX**

Some delicious vegan collard green wraps!

**CAMMIE**

Alex is the cook in the family.

**COLLEEN**

That sounds simply divine. I never could put a recipe together.

**ALEX**

How about we make you dinner this weekend?

**COLLEEN**

Really?

**ALEX**

You can bring your husband if you'd like.

**COLLEEN**

Oh. I don't know.

**ALEX**

Colleen!

**COLLEEN**

No, I can come. I'm just not sure Sanford will want to.

**CAMMIE**

*(fake)*

Oh, bummer.

**COLLEEN**

To tell you the truth I don't mind it being just us girls.

**BELLE**

You really should invite him at least. We'd love to get to know the both of you.

**COLLEEN**

Wouldn't that be breaking the rules?

**BELLE**

Just this once.

**ALEX**

Yes, please do! We insist on having him.

**CAMMIE**

Alex-

**COLLEEN**

I could ask.

**ALEX**

Perfect!

Alex kisses Colleen's cheek.

**COLLEEN**

I can't believe I've never met you wonderful women. I must have been under a rock.

**ALEX**

Well, we're certainly glad to know you now.

**CAMMIE**

We'll see you at dinner?

**ALEX**

AND Sanford?

**COLLEEN**

I'll do my best.

**ALEX**

*(on the way out)*

Ta-ta!

Alex and Cammie leave the garden with bushels of collard greens and radishes in their bags.

**COLLEEN**

Wow.

**BELLE**

Yeah.

**COLLEEN**

It's like a storm blew in.

**BELLE**

Alex can be a lot. But they're my best friends.

**COLLEEN**

And they're married.

**BELLE**

Kind of. It's a more of a lifelong partnership.

**COLLEEN**

What's the difference?

**BELLE**

They didn't do the government stuff.

**COLLEEN**

So basically married then. Cammie called her "wife."

**BELLE**

Okay. If you need to use that language.

**COLLEEN**

Is there something wrong with *that language*?

**BELLE**

It's a bit suffocating.

**COLLEEN**

And "lifelong partnership" isn't?

**BELLE**

It's different.

**COLLEEN**

How?

**BELLE**

What they have is different.

**COLLEEN**

Different from me?

**BELLE**

That's not what I said.

**COLLEEN**

You're making an assumption about my relationship I'm not too keen on.

**BELLE**

I'm not-

**COLLEEN**

I'm not suffocated.

**BELLE**

I didn't say you were.

Quiet.

**BELLE**

Are you okay?

**COLLEEN**

I'm fine.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

You know I don't think I'm really going to be able to come to the dinner. I'm sorry to mislead you.

**BELLE**

What? Why?

**COLLEEN**

Like I said, I don't think my husband will be into that sort of thing.

**BELLE**

So? Come by yourself.

**COLLEEN**

I can't leave him at that time of day.

**BELLE**

Why not?

**COLLEEN**

He's-

**BELLE**

Used to your cooking on the table?

**COLLEEN**

No. It's not that. We're not like that.

**BELLE**

So you say.

**COLLEEN**

Belle. I can't just pick up and do whatever I want. I don't live alone like you. I have a partner and- and responsibilities.

**BELLE**

The most important of which should be to yourself.

**COLLEEN**

Maybe when you're older you'll understand.

**BELLE**

I'm not a kid, okay?

**COLLEEN**

I recognize that.

**BELLE**

So you don't need to talk down to me.

**COLLEEN**

You started it.

Quiet. They both let out a laugh.

**BELLE**

Look at us.

**COLLEEN**

A couple of kids.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

In the evenings he needs to be on oxygen.

**BELLE**

What?

**COLLEEN**

Sanford. He has a condition.

**BELLE**

Oh. God.

**COLLEEN**

He's not capable of doing a few things himself and we don't have anyone in home.

**BELLE**

Shit.

**COLLEEN**

It's bad. And it's getting worse.

**BELLE**

Colleen. I'm so sorry.

**COLLEEN**

It's okay. I mean. It's not okay. But it's okay.

**BELLE**

I'm a fucking idiot.

**COLLEEN**

No-

**BELLE**

I know I can be a bit...opinionated. I didn't mean to make assumptions about you. I don't fucking know anything. I'm sorry.

**COLLEEN**

We all do it.

**BELLE**

Yeah?

**COLLEEN**

I might have assumed you were a man hating hippy feminist.

They laugh.

**BELLE**

*(like, you're not wrong)*

Well...

Quiet.

**BELLE**

You're strong, you know? Not everybody would give themselves up to take care of somebody else.

**COLLEEN**

I'm not giving up much.

**BELLE**

What do you mean?

**COLLEEN**

It's not like I'd be out doing extreme sports or going to the club if I didn't have to take care of him.

**BELLE**

Why not?

**COLLEEN**

*(chuckles)*

Really?

**BELLE**

I mean, it doesn't have to be that intense. But you could be doing more.



**COLLEEN**

I don't want more.

**BELLE**

Everybody wants more.

**COLLEEN**

Not everybody. Some people are perfectly content with being...content.

**BELLE**

Are you content?

**COLLEEN**

Nothing is perfect.

**BELLE**

So are you content or are you...something else.

**COLLEEN**

Content means ebb and flow.

**BELLE**

How bad is the ebb?

**COLLEEN**

Look who's being nosy now.

**BELLE**

How sweet is the flow?

**COLLEEN**

I sort of came here to relax. Not be interrogated.

**BELLE**

So it's not content. Home.

**COLLEEN**

Belle-

**BELLE**

I'm being nosy. I know. I just. I've seen this before. I've seen people living, never really thinking they deserve greater than what they have. And they let every little excuse keep them in that place. They give all their limbs and organs away before realizing there isn't a body left. I know it's paradoxical, but you have to take care of yourself in order to be able to take care of others.

**COLLEEN**

I'm here, aren't I? Doing something for myself?

**BELLE**

Yeah.

**COLLEEN**

Can't that be enough for now?

Colleen stands.

**COLLEEN**

It's already getting dark.

**BELLE**

So it is.

**COLLEEN**

I should be getting home.

Quiet.

**BELLE**

Colleen-

**COLLEEN**

Belle.

**BELLE**

Come to the dinner. It'll be right here in the garden. Plenty of fresh air for Sanford. Good food. You'll both love it.

Colleen thinks.

**COLLEEN**

I'll think about it.

**BELLE**

We want you to feel welcome here.

**COLLEEN**

Thank you. I do.

**BELLE**

Good.

**COLLEEN**

It's the strangest thing. All this time I've lived just over there and I've never even noticed this beautiful little place. Right under my nose.

Colleen leaves the garden. Belle watches her go.

She twirls at her hair. She hums as she does.

She finds a knot in the hair. She tries to work it out, but it doesn't budge. She rips it out, pulling out a couple of strands.

She goes to the plot Colleen was working in. She buries her hair strands in the dirt.

She leaves the garden.

Emptiness and quiet in the garden.

Plants are ruffled by little creatures that crawl along the ground. Sprouts peak out from Colleen's plot.

## **AN AFTERNOON**

Alex, Cammie, and Belle enter the garden in a whirlwind.

**ALEX**

We could use him.

**CAMMIE**

Alex, don't.

**ALEX**

It's a sign.

**CAMMIE**

Absolutely not.

**BELLE**

Like, *use* him use him?

**ALEX**

It's too perfect.

**CAMMIE**

Not everything is a sign Alex.

**BELLE**

But the worms-

**CAMMIE**

It's a fucking garden. There are worms.

**ALEX**

I've never seen an empty patch here.

**CAMMIE**

Is that not normal? I don't know what's normal.

**BELLE**

They were like a million teeming all over each other. That's not normal.

**ALEX**

And she just arrived right after that?

**BELLE**

And they were gone when she started digging.

**CAMMIE**

So what?

**ALEX**

Cammie! Come on.

**CAMMIE**

We don't even know that this is the kind of person we want to have around. We don't know her at all!

**BELLE**

There's something about her...

**ALEX**

Look what's fallen into our laps!

**BELLE**

She just woke up here one day. Walking aimlessly and ended up here without even realizing it.

**ALEX**

That means something.

**CAMMIE**

Or maybe it doesn't.

**BELLE**

Perhaps we should reap the good fortune we've been given.

**CAMMIE**

Both of you have gone crazy, then.

**ALEX**

Hey!

**CAMMIE**

I'm sorry honey, it's just. I don't think we should do this to her.

**ALEX**

To her? You mean *for* her.

**CAMMIE**

Even if she does decide, it'll be because she's in a fragile place.

**BELLE**

*(to herself)*

Sounds familiar...

**ALEX**

What?

**CAMMIE**

Something doesn't feel right.

**BELLE**

People don't just wander into the garden every day.

Cammie sighs.

The women disperse. They vanish.

## **A MORNING**

Colleen enters the garden carrying a canvas bag.

She sets herself down in her plot.

She takes out packets of home depot type seed bags.

She rips the tops off of them.

She puts gloves on.

She makes little pockets in the dirt, puts seeds in from the packet, then covers the pockets up.

She does this 3 times.

She takes off her gloves. She wipes sweat from her brow.

She takes her hat off and fans herself with it.

She looks up at the sky.

A fruit drops from a tree. A pomegranate.

She goes to it. She cracks it on a stump.

She enjoys it greatly and slowly. She scoops the seeds with her hands and sucks on them.

She moans slightly at its taste.

She digs a hole to hide the evidence.

While digging, she finds a fingernail in the dirt.

She inspects it, notices what it is, then throws it in surprise. She stands up suddenly.

She goes back to her plot.

Alex arrives. She is radiant.

**ALEX**

What are you doing?

**COLLEEN**

*(startled)*

Oh! I-

**ALEX**

Ah! Didn't mean to scare you.

**COLLEEN**

It's okay. I'm not scared.

Alex scouts the ground for dropped fruits and finds some.

**COLLEEN**

You're up early.

**ALEX**

Must pick fruits for breakfast.

**ALEX**

*(noticing the seed packets)*

You know you can't leave those there, right?

**COLLEEN**

What? Oh! I won't. I just got here.

**ALEX**

The garden doesn't like trash.

**COLLEEN**

You mean Belle?

**ALEX**

Uh. Yeah. She likes things to be neat.

**COLLEEN**

I'll keep that on my radar.

**ALEX**

Look at this!

Alex bends down to sit with Colleen. She holds a worm on her finger.

**COLLEEN**

Oh, gross.

**ALEX**

Look at it go!

**COLLEEN**

It's so slow.

**ALEX**

Slow is such a wonderful thing to be.

**COLLEEN**

Being slow is something I've always been chastised for.  
Won't your finger get dirty?

**ALEX**

*(laughs)*

We're surrounded by dirt, Colleen.

Alex puts the worm down gently on a plant.

**COLLEEN**

Where's Cammie?

**ALEX**

Still sleeping. Why?

**COLLEEN**

Nothing. I'm just, not used to being anywhere my husband isn't. Getting used to it.

**ALEX**

But you must bring him to our dinner! We all really want to meet the man you spend all your time with.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

I don't want to lie to you Alex.

**ALEX**

What do you mean?

**COLLEEN**

I don't know that I'll come.

**ALEX**

Belle mentioned that. Is it because of him?

**COLLEEN**

Well-

**ALEX**

Because he'll have a great time. You just need to get him over here.

**COLLEEN**

He's rather sick.

**ALEX**

What do you mean? A cold?

**COLLEEN**

No. Not a cold. Um. Worse.

**ALEX**

Oh my god! I'm so sorry, Colleen. That must be stressful.

**COLLEEN**

He needs me.

**ALEX**

You'd be here with him, wouldn't you?



**COLLEEN**

I just get so scared.

**ALEX**

It's bad, then.

**COLLEEN**

People try to convince me it's going to be okay. But I know it isn't.

**ALEX**

I'm not such a person. I know how silly denial feels.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

Do you ever worry? About Cammie?

**ALEX**

In what way?

**COLLEEN**

I worry all the time about Sanford. How this must be scaring him. That soon he might have to leave me on my own.

**ALEX**

Maybe the best way to keep him from worrying is to show him you'll have a terribly full life when he's not around. By bringing him to dinner!

**COLLEEN**

I don't know.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

You and Cammie are wonderful. You're so lucky to have found each other. I feel lucky to have found both of you.

**ALEX**

You flatter too much! It's Cammie that's so beautiful. Her beautiful little face. It's like a plum. So plump. Full of juice. This morning, she was so peaceful in the white sheets. Her face could was swollen from laying for so long. So swollen it could burst. Burst all of its red purple plummy juices all over the white pillowcase. The sun hadn't fully come up yet, so the light in the room was blue. Her skin looked so pretty and mysterious in that blue light. And her breathing. I think of how it feels when she sleeps and I put my fingers under her nose to feel her breath on me. I'm not checking or anything, I know she's fine by the faint sound of her snore. But to feel the air come out of her lungs through her plump little nose. And the condensation on my fingernails. I sometimes think she's

awake but she lets me believe otherwise because she loves me so and wants me to lick her wet breath off my fingernails. These mornings. So peaceful and delightful.

Colleen doesn't respond for some time. Alex laughs.

**ALEX**

I love to sneak away before she wakes up and be here alone for a while. Pick things for her with intention and care.

**COLLEEN**

She's lucky.

**ALEX**

I'm the lucky one.

You shouldn't fear being alone, you know.

**COLLEEN**

You make being with someone sound so lovely and so small.

**ALEX**

Oh, it is. But being alone is just as lovely. I come here in the mornings by myself for a reason. To be away from Cammie, missing her, is just as incredible as the taste of her breath. I know people say it all the time, that absence makes the heart grow fonder and yadda yadda. But it's like, real. Nothing would ever have meaning if you weren't going to lose it eventually. It's naughty but, thinking about her missing me while I'm gone, imagining what I'm doing, it sends shivers through me.

**COLLEEN**

I don't think Sanford imagines me at all.

**ALEX**

How about this, I'll imagine you.

**COLLEEN**

Really?

**ALEX**

When I leave, I'll think about you here alone, moving, digging. That way you know someone is thinking of you and you'll feel it.

**COLLEEN**

You'll forget.

**ALEX**

I won't. I promise. And you'll know I won't. Because you'll feel it all over the inside.

**COLLEEN**

Okay.

**ALEX**

Be less stiff.

**COLLEEN**

What?

**ALEX**

I don't want to think of you all stiff. Relax.

Out of nowhere Alex starts skipping like a child through the garden.

**COLLEEN**

What are you doing?

**ALEX**

Reminding you that you can move in so many different ways.

Alex stops. She flops onto the ground.

**COLLEEN**

Skipping is...not real.

**ALEX**

Is too. I just did it.

**COLLEEN**

It's not even something children do, it's something children in fairytales do.

**ALEX**

Couldn't this be a fairytale?

Colleen laughs awkwardly.

**ALEX**

Your body could be light if you let it.

Alex stands up as though she's filled partly with helium.

**ALEX**

Do it with me.

**COLLEEN**

I...can't.

Alex takes Colleen's hand. Colleen stands. They both float.

**ALEX**

Follow my lead.

They breathe together.

**ALEX**

When you feel lighter in your mind, all that ever weighed you down ceases to be.

**COLLEEN**

*(trying to make it work)*

I feel that.

**ALEX**

There's no reason we couldn't float away.

Alex starts to exit.

**ALEX**

So why not float?

Colleen realizes Alex is leaving.

**COLLEEN**

Alex-

**ALEX**

Colleen! You're testing me. I like this game.

Alex dances out of the garden.

Colleen stiffens.

She notices herself stiffening. She intentionally slouches. She finds a posture in between. She is uncomfortable.

She returns to her plot by skipping.

She laughs at herself.

She sits in the plot. She slowly takes her gloves off. She puts her hands in the dirt bare from now on.

She continues to plant her seeds.

She looks at the dirt now in her fingernails.

**A MID-MORNING**

**COLLEEN**

There was a fingernail.

Belle enters the garden and sits on a bench.

**COLLEEN**

In the dirt. I saw a fingernail.

**BELLE**

It wouldn't be uncommon to lose a nail every not and then. It's dirty work.

**COLLEEN**

Not a piece of a nail. Or a fake acrylic nail. A whole entire human nail.

**BELLE**

Where did you find it?

**COLLEEN**

*(points)*

Over there.

**BELLE**

And where is it now?

**COLLEEN**

It freaked me out, I chucked it somewhere, I don't know.

**BELLE**

Well, if you find it again, put it in your pocket.

**COLLEEN**

What?

**BELLE**

For evidence?

*(waits for a laugh that doesn't come)*

Kidding.

Just be glad you didn't find a whole finger.

Colleen, freaked out. Belle laughs.

**BELLE**

I'm only joking. There wouldn't be a finger.

What were you doing in that patch?

**COLLEEN**

A pomegranate fell. And rather than let it go to waste for worms I thought I'd eat it.

**BELLE**

Hm.

**COLLEEN**

Sorry if that's against the rules.

**BELLE**

It's perfectly fine to eat fallen fruit.

**COLLEEN**

Pomegranate isn't in season.

**BELLE**

Is it not?

**COLLEEN**

I didn't think so-

**BELLE**

The pomegranate bush is the most fruitful thing in the garden for some reason. Big ones drop off left and right. You almost have to look out or you could be hit by one.

**COLLEEN**

It was delicious-

**BELLE**

So sweet and so cold.

**COLLEEN**

You read the poem?

**BELLE**

Revisited.

This is just to say.

I have eaten

the plums

that were in

the icebox

and which

you were probably

saving

for breakfast

Forgive me

they were delicious

so sweet

and so cold  
I love a poem you can memorize.

**COLLEEN**

Sanford showed it to me. He has a habit of eating my treats. And whenever he does he recites the poem to apologize. It's a funny little thing we do.

**BELLE**

That's really manipulative.

**COLLEEN**

I'm sorry?

**BELLE**

He probably thinks he's so poetic. Like the way he mistreats you is fine because it's poetic.

**COLLEEN**

Mistreating is a strong word. I'd rather not think of him in that way.

**BELLE**

What way? The way that he is?

**COLLEEN**

You don't even know him.

**BELLE**

You don't exactly make him sound like a great guy.

**COLLEEN**

Then why are you all so obsessed with me bringing him to dinner?

**BELLE**

We're trying to be nice. To do a nice thing.

**COLLEEN**

No one asked you to be nice. You don't have to do me any favors. I'm happy to just be here. Plant my things. Get a little breather out of the house for a while. And go.

**BELLE**

That's not what you said.

You said you wanted to meet new people. To be a part of something.

**COLLEEN**

I. I did say that.

**BELLE**

You said you wanted freedom.

**COLLEEN**

That I did not say.

**BELLE**

You sounded trapped.

**COLLEN**

You're twisting my words.

**BELLE**

It's not your words. I can see it on your face.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

I'm usually a better hider.

**BELLE**

You don't have to be when you're here.

**COLLEEN**

I don't usually talk to people I just met like this.

**BELLE**

Like?

**COLLEEN**

Like about all this stuff. Stuff that makes me feel like this.

**BELLE**

Like?

**COLLEEN**

Like I don't know myself.

**BELLE**

Is that a bad thing?

**COLLEEN**

It's surprising.

**BELLE**

I'm not a scary surprise, I promise.

**COLLEEN**

It's. Me. I'm surprising myself.



Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

How do you do it?

**BELLE**

What?

**COLLEEN**

You're alone. How do you live like that?

**BELLE**

Nice.

**COLLEEN**

I don't mean it as an insult! I admire it about you.

**BELLE**

Well. For starters. I don't hate myself. Which helps.

**COLLEEN**

You think I hate myself?

**BELLE**

I just mean, when I'm alone, I like the person I'm with a lot.

**COLLEEN**

I like myself enough.

**BELLE**

That's a start.

*(thinks)*

Who is Colleen? Spend some time getting to know her.

**COLLEEN**

I've known myself for decades.

**BELLE**

You have a long life ahead of you.

Colleen laughs.

**COLLEEN**

Do you know how old I am?

**BELLE**

You just said talking to me makes you feel like you don't know who you are anymore.

Belle moves to sit with Colleen.

**BELLE**

You love poetry, don't you? Why not try writing some?

**COLLEEN**

*(laughs)*

I've never been creative.

**BELLE**

Everybody is creative. Humans create. That's kind of our thing.

**COLLEEN**

Where would I even start?

**BELLE**

First you read more of it. Then you just write something. Anything. Then make it better. Make it grow.

Belle grabs a copy of *My Lover Is a Woman* by Chaia Heller from her tote bag.

**COLLEEN**

What's that?

**BELLE**

An anthology I used to be obsessed with.

*(reading from the book)*

"When all the drowsy metaphors  
about women and fruit  
have been peeled and devoured;

there's just you, me  
a bowl full of summer peaches,  
two parentheses  
with nothing in between  
    (just space)  
for the tongue's imagination"

Quiet.

**BELLE**

It was my favorite. But I hadn't thought about it in ages. You reminded me of how much I used to love poetry when you brought up *This is Just to Say*.

**COLLEEN**

We never read poetry like that in school.

**BELLE**

You can borrow it.

Belle hands it to Colleen. She looks at the cover but doesn't take the book.

**COLLEEN**

I don't have much time to read.

**BELLE**

Bullshit. What else do you do all day?

**COLLEEN**

*(singing)*

Nothing to do but play.

**BELLE**

Huh?

**COLLEEN**

It's a song my grandma made up, she used to sing it to help me sleep.

*(singing)*

Pretty little butterfly

What do you do all day?

Roam around the sunny sky

With nothing to do but play.

Nothing to do but play

All the livelong day

So

Fly butterfly

Fly butterfly

Don't waste your time away.

**BELLE**

Colleen-

**COLLEEN**

*(a little shaken)*

Belle, I uh, should get home now. I've been here all morning.

**BELLE**

You don't have to go.

**COLLEEN**

I really do.

**BELLE**

That's the most beautiful song I've ever heard.

**COLLEEN**

It just a silly kid's song.

**BELLE**

Writing poetry is in your genes.

**COLLEEN**

Sanford is waiting for me.

**BELLE**

Excuses are easy.

**COLLEEN**

Being with him is not easy. Don't make me out to be some kind of coward.

**BELLE**

That's not what I said. Doing what one has always done is easy. Putting yourself in what's new, really looking at yourself, that's hard.

Colleen thinks.

**COLLEEN**

Have a nice day.

**BELLE**

Just. Please. At least take the book? You might like the poetry in it.

**COLLEEN**

Have a nice day, Belle.

Belle, alone in the garden.

She picks up some of the seed packets Colleen left behind.  
She throws them in the trash.

She looks at the empty plot.

She digs it up.

She takes a pair of scissors from the gardening area. She cuts her hair up above her shoulders. She places the hair in the plot. She covers it with dirt.

She picks up a watering can. She waters the plot.

She looks at the sky.

She whispers something.

Drops of water fall from the sky.

It starts to sprinkle. Belle holds her hand up to feel it. She holds her tongue out to drink it. She rubs some of the rainwater on her face.

She puts the can down.

She leaves.

Rain for some time. It comes to barely a sprinkle.

### **AN EARLY EVENING**

Alex and Cammie enter the garden.

**ALEX**

She's a total dear.

**CAMMIE**

Like the animal?

**ALEX**

No, like, a dear. Like, you, dear.

**CAMMIE**

She could use some work.

**ALEX**

I think I'd like to keep her around.

**CAMMIE**

You're trying to make me jealous.

**ALEX**

Oh, you know I don't mean it that way.

**CAMMIE**

I thought she was kind of deer-like, like the animal, she has along neck and she's bony.

**ALEX**

Jeez, well, don't say it to her face.

**CAMMIE**

Deer-like face. I like deer. They're graceful.

**ALEX**

Maybe you like her a little more than you'd care to admit?

**CAMMIE**

I still think it's a bad idea to...*include* her.

**ALEX**

But she's literally perfect. The husband-

**CAMMIE**

You can't assume things.

*(playful shift)*

You know what assuming does?

**ALEX**

Makes a dear out of you and me.

They chuckle. Alex lays in the grass.

**ALEX**

The rain smells so good on the soil.

**CAMMIE**

Doesn't it? You'll get your clothes dirty, though.

**ALEX**

You like me dirty.

**CAMMIE**

Maybee. But not when I'm the one on laundry duty.

**ALEX**

I can do it. I love doing laundry.

**CAMMIE**

You're weird.

**ALEX**

You like that I'm weird.

**CAMMIE**

Right again.

**ALEX**

You wandered in all doe-eyed your first day here, too.

**CAMMIE**

And?

**ALEX**

And it was adorable.

**CAMMIE**

You always describe people like children. "Cute." "Adorable."

**ALEX**

What's bad about being cute?

**CAMMIE**

Some people might think it's rude.

**ALEX**

Well, I'm not concerned with other people's thoughts.

Quiet.

**CAMMIE**

You know, I'm not so sure Belle is set on her joining us either.

**ALEX**

She seemed to think it's a good idea.

**CAMMIE**

Belle thinks she has to save everyone. Not that she necessarily wants to.

**ALEX**

Don't speak too loudly. She could be walking nearby.

**CAMMIE**

I'm not saying anything untrue.

**ALEX**

But perhaps something you wouldn't say to her face?

**CAMMIE**

Look, I think she just wants to save whatever hurt animal with a sob story walks in here and you're just bored enough to go along with her.

**ALEX**

You think I'm bored?

**CAMMIE**

I think you're looking for some excitement.

**ALEX**

Is that different than being bored?

**CAMMIE**

Just something to play with.

**ALEX**

Someone, you mean. She isn't a thing, she's a person.

**CAMMIE**

A very flawed person. She actually loves her husband.

**ALEX**

You do not want me to recall your husband, do you?

**CAMMIE**

It's uncalled for.

**ALEX**

No no, you've called it. You thought he could do you no wrong.

**CAMMIE**

Except he *did* do me wrong.

**ALEX**

We basically had to rip your claws off him.

**CAMMIE**

But I still came, didn't I? I don't think she will. I think we're going to waste lots of time trying to talk her through it and she'll back out at the last second.

**ALEX**

Well, then let that be her choice. The least we can do is give her one. Aren't you grateful for yours?

**CAMMIE**

I'm only saying there are more interesting women out there I'm sure who need our help.

**ALEX**

And we'll get to them eventually. Colleen is here now, and she wants more I can tell she wants more.

**CAMMIE**

Fine. I'll back down. Maybe you'll even prove me wrong. It would be the first time, but hey, there's a first time for everything.



Alex chuckles.

**CAMMIE**

Are you laughing at me?

**ALEX**

No! I mean yes. Not *at*. You're just funny.

**CAMMIE**

I wasn't being funny.

**ALEX**

Your grumpiness is cute.

Cammie chuckles.

**CAMMIE**

You're lucky you look so beautiful in the grass.

**ALEX**

Yeah? Well. You look so beautiful when you look at me in the grass.

Quiet.

**CAMMIE**

I love you, Alex. You know that, right?

**ALEX**

Claws on that man!

**CAMMIE**

But I don't even think of him anymore.

**ALEX**

Except to be grateful that he brought me you.

Quiet.

**CAMMIE**

Has Belle ever told you...um...like what this is?

**ALEX**

What what is?

**CAMMIE**

Like. Why are we like this?

**ALEX**

Cammie-

**CAMMIE**

I know there's a lot of secrecy or whatever. I shouldn't question and I should just be grateful the earth has given us this *gift*. But sometimes I wonder if that's bullshit. Don't you?

**ALEX**

No. I don't.

**CAMMIE**

So you don't know.

**ALEX**

I think as much as Belle knows is what I know.

**CAMMIE**

You don't ever think she's hiding something?

**ALEX**

Where is this coming from?

**CAMMIE**

Something is off.

**ALEX**

Maybe you're not feeling well.

**CAMMIE**

I haven't been sick // since...

**ALEX**

Relax. It's normal...I mean natural...to have questions.

**CAMMIE**

Questions maybe she doesn't want to answer.

**ALEX**

I think you need to have a little more trust in us.

**CAMMIE**

I just. Don't trust that she does this to people for the right reasons.

**ALEX**

Are you saying I'm not trustworthy?

**CAMMIE**

Not you. Belle.

**ALEX**

Belle is everything to me. Anything you say about her is a remark on me.

**CAMMIE**

Everything?

**ALEX**

You know what I mean.

I owe her my life.

**CAMMIE**

And what, I owe you mine forever, too?

Will I always have to play this game of second best?

**ALEX**

Will you always be so doubtful of me?

Quiet.

**CAMMIE**

You're not being // fair-

**ALEX**

You should put this to rest before Belle overhears you.

**CAMMIE**

*(shocked)*

Is that some kind of threat?

**ALEX**

I just want what's best for you, sweetheart. And I'm afraid your curiosity is going to fuck things up for you. For both of us.

Is that enough?

**CAMMIE**

Fine.

Quiet.

**ALEX**

I could lay here all day.

**CAMMIE**

It may rain again.

**ALEX**

Let it rain, then, I won't be bothered.

**CAMMIE**

Wouldn't that ruin your little dinner?

**ALEX**

We'll pray to see the full moon just one night.

**CAMMIE**

Pray?

**ALEX**

Don't mock it.

**CAMMIE**

Well excuse me. I didn't realize I could forego science and the weather report for praying.

**ALEX**

We can at least have hope that it'll all go smoothly.

**CAMMIE**

If she doesn't run off, the rain will surely ruin it.

**ALEX**

Negative Nancy.

**CAMMIE**

Not negative! Just. Realistic...Rebecca?

Alex laughs. Light thunder.

**CAMMIE**

Come on, Alex. Let's go home.

**ALEX**

I want to lay!

Cammiie tries to sit Alex up, but her hair gets caught in some brush.

**ALEX**

Ow!

**CAMMIE**

Here, let me help.

Cammie tries to untangle it.

**CAMMIE**

It won't budge.

**ALEX**

Get it out, Cammie.

**CAMMIE**

I'm trying! I don't want to rip it.

**ALEX**

DON'T rip it!

**CAMMIE**

Relax.

Cammie stops trying.

**ALEX**

What are you doing?

**CAMMIE**

Taking a second to breathe. I think it's just my anxiety making it harder or something.

Alex tries to pull it out herself.

**CAMMIE**

Wait!

She comes free, but the brush rips out some of her hair.

**ALEX**

Oh my god.

**CAMMIE**

Are you okay?

**ALEX**

That fucking hurt!

**CAMMIE**

Let me see.

**ALEX**

Don't touch! We need to go.

**CAMMIE**

It'll grow back-

**ALEX**

Look what you did. You upset her and now it's hurting me.

**CAMMIE**

Are you serious?

**ALEX**

Let's go. Now.

Alex and Cammie start to exit when Belle appears.

**BELLE**

Alex?

**ALEX**

// Belle!

**CAMMIE**

Belle! Your hair...

**ALEX**

How long have you // been standing there?

**BELLE**

Why aren't you two preparing for Colleen?

**CAMMIE**

What did you do to it?

**BELLE**

Cut it, obviously.

**ALEX**

So cute. But-

**BELLE**

It wasn't for vanity. The garden is hungry.

**ALEX**

You fed your hair to it?

**CAMMIE**

Belle, something just happened// to-

**ALEX**

Nothing happened.

**BELLE**

What?

**ALEX**

Nothing. My hair got stuck in a bush earlier.

**CAMMIE**

Stuck?

**BELLE**

We can't wait much longer.

**CAMMIE**

Why does it have to be her?

**ALEX**

I feel it. I feel that she's going to come.

**CAMMIE**

Belle, why does this garden do this to us? It grabbed on Alex earlier.

**ALEX**

Cammie. // Stop.

**BELLE**

It's about sacrifice, Cammie. Something you clearly know little about.

**CAMMIE**

Wow. As if I haven't sacrificed everything? And for what?

**ALEX**

For me, obviously! For us.

**BELLE**

In order to have all of this, you have to give something.

**CAMMIE**

Why does it have to be like that?

**ALEX**

That's enough. I'm so sorry Belle. She's sorry. She's just confused.

**CAMMIE**

Did you ever ask if it's even worth it?

**ALEX**

*(a little terrifying)*

I said that's enough.

**BELLE**

Colleen wants a new life. She deserves to have one.

**CAMMIE**

We don't need to bring him into it. Can't she join without-

**BELLE**

Sacrifice. You cannot be in this life without ridding yourself of what's troubling you in your old one.

**CAMMIE**

Maybe I don't want to be in this life.

**ALEX**

Sweetheart...

**BELLE**

I feared this would come.

**ALEX**

You don't mean it, do you?

**BELLE**

You've never been grateful for us saving you.

**CAMMIE**

Saving me? I am trapped!

**ALEX**

Cammie, stop!

You're breaking me.

**BELLE**

Perhaps we should sacrifice you, then.

**ALEX**

Don't say things you can't take back. We're all stuck in this together.

**BELLE**

No one is forcing you to do anything you don't want to.

**ALEX**

We all need to breathe. I bet the reason our prayers aren't working is because we're in such disarray. We need to unite and it'll all be fine.



**BELLE**

No one is keeping you here.

**ALEX**

That's not true. I want you to stay. Cammie?

**CAMMIE**

I...don't know.

Cammie runs off.

**ALEX**

Cammie!

**BELLE**

Let her go. It's only a matter of time before her hair starts to fall out and her face wrinkles and she gets scared enough to come back.

**ALEX**

I don't want her to be with me just because she's scared.

**BELLE**

Fear is very powerful, but it doesn't make her emotions less real.

**ALEX**

I'd rather not she have to be in fear to want to be around me.

**BELLE**

Well, we'll just bury her then.

**ALEX**

That's not funny.

**BELLE**

I'm only joking a little.

**ALEX**

I'm scared, Belle.

**BELLE**

Don't worry. Everything will be fine. I can feel it.

**ALEX**

Do you really have that feeling? Or are you just being...you.

**BELLE**

My feeling is never wrong.

**ALEX**

We need to save Cammie. We can't just let her shrivel up. She doesn't know what she's saying.

**BELLE**

You were like this when she first arrived, too.

**ALEX**

I know what's best for her.

**BELLE**

Did it ever occur to you that maybe pushing her beyond where she is capable of going will end badly?

**ALEX**

Isn't that what you're doing to Colleen?

**BELLE**

Excuse you?

**ALEX**

How do you even know she's ready? It's only been days.

**BELLE**

Wasn't this your idea?

**ALEX**

It...yeah. But I didn't-

**BELLE**

"It's all too perfect," you say.

**ALEX**

I didn't know it would have to be so fast.

**BELLE**

When she senses a body, she gets hungrier.

**ALEX**

She?

**BELLE**

*(frazzled)*

I mean the garden. Look. Time is running. I'll prepare the garden. You go and get Colleen, and the husband. She likes you. She'll listen.

**ALEX**

I don't know if I can-

**BELLE**

I know. I know you can. And that's all you need.

**ALEX**

What about Cammie?

**BELLE**

We will deal with her later. I promise.

Belle goes to Alex.

**BELLE**

Alex. I still care for you.

**ALEX**

I know.

Belle pulls Alex's hair back behind her ear, then caresses her face. Then makes her way with her fingers to Alex's mouth. She puts her finger in Alex's mouth. Alex sucks on it, but then Belle pulls away, leading her to want more.

**BELLE**

Good.

Alex and Belle set the table with an abundance of food. Pretty lights, candles, etc.

Alex leaves.

Belle sits in the dirt. She inspects some of it in her hand.

She returns to digging the grave.

## **THE RITUAL**

Belle continues to dig.

Colleen enters carrying Sanford, who is a sack of potatoes.

Belle quickly hides the shovel.

Alex enters.

**BELLE**

Colleen.

**COLLEEN**

Belle. Your hair.

**BELLE**

I know-

**COLLEEN**

It looks amazing.

**BELLE**

You think so?

**COLLEEN**

I really do.

**BELLE**

Is this...

**COLLEEN**

Where are my manners? This is Sanford.

**BELLE**

It's a pleasure to meet you, Sanford.

**ALEX**

We've heard so much about you.

**COLLEEN**

This is Alex and Belle and... where's Cammie?

**BELLE**

She's not well.

**COLLEEN**

Oh no! I'm so sorry. Maybe we should bring her something?

**BELLE**

No. She'll be fine. Right Alex?

**ALEX**

Yeah, just a little stomach thing.

**COLLEEN**

Oh no. Is it something in the garden that's made her sick?

**BELLE**

Of course not.

**COLLEEN**

Maybe she accidentally ate a worm, something // like that.

**BELLE**

No. Must've been something processed and toxic she ate.

**ALEX**

We don't have to dwell on it, she'll be alright. I hope. Maybe she'll even join us // later.

**BELLE**

Why don't we get started?

**COLLEEN**

Just look at this spread.

Everybody makes their plate.

**COLLEEN**

Sanford, I can make your plate?

Nothing.

**ALEX**

Not much of a talker, huh?

**COLLEEN**

But a great listener.

Colleen makes both plates. Everybody sits.

**BELLE**

I was getting worried you wouldn't come.

**COLLEEN**

It's one of his better days.

**ALEX**

We're so glad you're both here.

**COLLEEN**

I'm glad, too.

Oh my god, this tastes amazing.

**ALEX**

Oh, wait-

**BELLE**

We usually have a moment before we start.

**COLLEEN**

Oh no, I'm sorry.

**ALEX**

It's okay!

**COLLEEN**

To pray?

**ALEX**

Not like that.

**BELLE**

We just thank the earth for what she's given us.

**COLLEEN**

Oh.

Everybody quiet and bowing their heads for a moment.

**BELLE**

Dearest Garden Mother, we thank you for the sacrifices you make to put on our plates, to give us life, to save us from ourselves. We continue to serve you as long as you will have us.

Quiet.

**COLLEEN**

That was a little-

**ALEX**

May I also propose a toast?

**COLLEEN**

Oh I love toasts!

This is difficult for Alex to get through.

**ALEX**

Colleen. And. Um. Sanford. We gather to celebrate you and your beautiful presence in the garden. To sharing life with you, to sharing the garden's abundance. We can't wait to share even more with you as time goes by. All of us. A little family.

**BELLE**

To Colleen!

They raise their glasses.

**COLLEEN**

Thank you both for making me feel so welcome. And Cammie of course. It's such a shame she couldn't // be here.

**BELLE**

You're welcome.

**COLLEEN**

But that's alright. There will be more dinners maybe.

**BELLE**

Of course there will.

Alex stands.

**BELLE**

Alex, sit.

**COLLEEN**

Are you okay?

**BELLE**

She's fine.

Alex realizes she's stood up and looks around the table. She obeys Belle.

**ALEX**

Sorry. I'm fine.

**COLLEEN**

*(to Sanford)*

Eat up, darling.

He's not much of a vegetable lover but he'll eat it up eventually once he realizes there's no meat coming to the table.

Everything is unbelievable.

**ALEX**

You have no idea.

**COLLEEN**

Sorry?

**BELLE**

She means, you have no idea how much work went into it. She made everything.

**COLLEEN**

These pomegranate seeds.

**ALEX**

The tree is so abundant, they're kind of in everything we make.

**COLLEEN**

They're so loaded. Historically.

**ALEX**

What do you mean?

**COLLEEN**

People say it was Eve's apple.

**ALEX**

They do?

**BELLE**

It was also Persephone's.

**COLLEEN**

I don't think I know that one.

**BELLE**

When Hades dragged Persephone to the underworld, she ate 6 pomegranate seeds each day to stay alive.

**COLLEEN**

That's a little dark.

**BELLE**

No, it's a symbol of life.

**COLLEEN**

Persephone's life, Eve's evil-

**BELLE**

No, it wasn't evil that she ate. It was knowledge.

**COLLEEN**

Right, sorry, I-

**BELLE**



That's how they want you to remember it. Like knowledge was the evil thing.

**COLLEEN**

I *know* how the story goes.

**ALEX**

I didn't know about either of those.

**COLLEEN**

No matter, it's more interesting if you know how to make them work in a salad, isn't it? There's something about this food, it makes my mouth tingle.

**ALEX**

Secret ingredients.

**COLLEEN**

I used to cook with my grandmother. And there'd always be a moment or some time where she'd ask me to leave the kitchen. Said I was too young to know the recipes yet. And as I got older, I got less interested in cooking with her, more interested in...other things. I suppose by the time I was old enough to know the full recipes it was too late for her to show them to me.

**BELLE**

She never wrote them down?

**COLLEEN**

There weren't exact measurements like that.

**ALEX**

I know that's a romantic idea, but honestly that's always really bothered me. People holding hostage information so they *need you* to be able to do things. If all our grandmothers just wrote stuff down instead of hoarding information, the world might be in a better place right now.

**COLLEEN**

Or maybe if we weren't so good at letting them die without us ever listening.

**BELLE**

You loved // her.

**COLLEEN**

Dreary topics aren't so good for the table.

Quiet.

**ALEX**

Sanford do you like to cook?

**COLLEEN**

Oh he never picked up so much as a cutting board. And now. Well. We order in a lot.

**ALEX**

*(laughing, then abruptly down)*

Cammie hates cooking, too.

She loves to watch me cook though.

Nothing is better than making her something she loves. Seeing how happy it makes her.

Quiet.

**BELLE**

*(to Colleen)*

How did you two meet?

**COLLEEN**

Oh, a story I love to tell. We were...we were...well, hold on a minute. We were...I was...oh my god. I've forgotten how we met. Lapse of memory. How could I have forgotten? Sanford, help me out here.

No response.

**ALEX**

Sorry, did he say something just then?

**COLLEEN**

Oh! Ha! Sometimes I forget. He doesn't speak to me anymore.

I mean he gets nervous around new people.

**BELLE**

Maybe it'll come to you later. More food?

**COLLEEN**

I couldn't-

**BELLE**

Don't be shy. If you're enjoying it have more. There's plenty.

Colleen stands to make a plate.

**COLLEEN**

Sanford, more food?

No response.

**BELLE**

How could he want more, he hasn't even touched his plate.

**ALEX**

Can he *hear* us?

**COLLEEN**

Of course he can. I mean-

**ALEX**

But can he *communicate*?

**COLLEEN**

I. Don't know. Sometimes I think I can hear him but. Maybe it's my imagination.

**ALEX**

He seems kind of like a vegetable.

**COLLEEN**

Don't talk about him like he's not sitting here. Please.

**ALEX**

I'm sorry, Colleen-

Colleen sits with her plate.

**COLLEEN**

I think he doesn't hear me at all.

**BELLE**

How long as it been like this?

**ALEX**

(*to Sanford*)

Forgive me for asking, but what exactly is your condition?

**COLLEEN**

We don't really like to talk about it.

**BELLE**

Don't pry Alex.

**ALEX**

I didn't mean to!

Is there anything we can do? Sanford are you...is he comfortable?

**COLLEEN**

Don't worry about him.

**ALEX**

Is there any alternative?

**BELLE**

Alex.

**ALEX**

I mean. Is he going to get better?

**COLLEEN**

Uh. No.

**ALEX**

Poor dear.

**COLLEEN**

He's not a poor thing.

**ALEX**

Of course not. I'm sorry. But you must have some hope still.

**BELLE**

ALEX.

**COLLEEN**

False hope is not hope at all, it's just cruelty.

**ALEX**

Of course. Morbid curiosity getting the better of me.

**COLLEEN**

Curiosity. You ladies are very curious.

**BELLE**

Aren't we all?

**COLLEEN**

Some books you know once you open you can never close back.

**BELLE**

Is that so bad?

**COLLEEN**

My tongue feels loose. What's in this?

**ALEX**

It's just fresh juice.

**COLLEEN**

We had fruit trees in our yard. Saturday mornings, my mom would walk me around the yard and point them out to me, like I hadn't seen them all a million times before. They must have been there for centuries. We'd get to one, whatever one she was feeling that day, and she'd make me climb up and pick the fruit so we could have juice for the weekend.

**BELLE**

Colleen, why don't you sing that song your grandmother made up? For Alex.

**COLLEEN**

I couldn't.

**ALEX**

A song?!

**BELLE**

She would love to hear it.

**COLLEEN**

I don't really sing.

**BELLE**

That's not true.

**ALEX**

Everybody can sing.

**COLLEEN**

I don't like to.

**ALEX**

You don't have to be embarrassed around us. We're your friends.

**COLLEEN**

I don't think Sanford will like it.

**BELLE**

What?

**COLLEEN**

He knows how bad I am.

**BELLE**

Is that something he's said? That you're bad?

**COLLEEN**

I'm not doing it.

**BELLE**

*(quietly)*

I loved your voice.

Quiet.

**BELLE**

Colleen. I want to tell you a story.

There were once two women. Who loved each other very much. A kind of love that only comes to you once in a lifetime. It wasn't a selfish love. It was pure and full, but it was hated. They lived during a time when it wasn't okay for women to love each other out in the open. And what's worse, they were each married.

**ALEX**

Belle?

**BELLE**

The women lived next to each other all their lives. Secretly meeting in a special place hidden from the world, living their regular lives with their husbands, their *families*, out in the open. One of the women grew tired of having to love in the dark, but she loved the other woman so much that she'd do anything she asked. So in the dark they met. They grew old like this. And one of them even grew to be very sick. The other woman saw a way out. She could whisk her love to the countryside, where women often went when they were sick to live out their days in such a place that their husbands and children did not have to watch. But her love said no. She so feared people would discover their desire. She told her no. She would rather live her days out in the shadow than be with the woman. And she died. But the woman left her a secret. She requested to be buried in their special hiding place. Everyone came to the funeral and mourned the loss, never knowing what kinds of little blessings of love ever occurred on the land they stood on. The woman was so distraught, she could not return to the grave, to their special place, for years. She, in fact, never returned until she neared the end of her life. She came to the hiding place, hoping that if she slept there long enough, she would die there and rest her soul next to her lover's forever. When she came upon the grave, she found that a tree had grown in its place. A pomegranate tree. She ate its fruit. She couldn't believe how lovely it tasted, like the freshest fruit in the world. She ate and ate until she grew so tired she fell asleep right underneath. When she woke up, she had returned to a self she hadn't seen in...in a very long time. And she lived on in this young body, cursed to remember forever the life she could not have.

**ALEX**

Belle.

**COLLEEN**

*(recalling Alex's fairytale from earlier)*

What a terrible fairytale.

**ALEX**

Belle what is that.

**COLLEEN**

I'm feeling sick.

**BELLE**

It's happening.

**COLLEEN**

Maybe I, Sanford and I should go home. I feel dizzy. Maybe I've got what Cammie's got.

**BELLE**

Highly unlikely.

Cammie enters. She has decayed. She is crawling along the dirt.

**ALEX**

Cammie?

**COLLEEN**

// Cammie?

**ALEX**

What's happened to you?

**BELLE**

What are you doing here?

**COLLEEN**

What do you mean, Cammie? That's not Cammie.

**CAMMIE**

Alex.

**ALEX**

What did you do to her?

**BELLE**

Me? I did nothing. I told you once you betray her things go downhill fast.

**ALEX**

Her? Was that story...

**CAMMIE**

Alex-

**ALEX**

Belle, fix her. Now.

Alex tries to feel Cammie with something from the garden.

**ALEX**

Here, eat this.

**BELLE**

She has to sacrifice something of herself. She has to // want it.

**ALEX**

You said we'd find her and help her.

**BELLE**

I did. I-

**CAMMIE**

I'm sorry, Alex.

Alex goes to Cammie.

**ALEX**

I'm so sorry baby. I should've never let you run off. We'll fix this.

**COLLEEN**

I need to go home now.

**BELLE**

No!

**ALEX**

What do we do?

**CAMMIE**

Please, let me stay, I never want to feel this way again.

**ALEX**

So it *is* that you're scared.

**BELLE**

I hate to say I told you so.

**CAMMIE**

No, the way I feel without you.

**ALEX**

Cammie, I'm so so sorry. I'm here. I'm here.

**COLLEEN**



Whatever this is is...I don't want it to be-

**ALEX**

Belle, hurry. Do something.

Colleen gets up. She nearly falls into the grave.

**COLLEEN**

What's this? Is this my plot?

**BELLE**

Colleen.

**COLLEEN**

Why would you dig up my plot? Did you do this?

**BELLE**

For you.

**COLLEEN**

For me?

**BELLE**

For... him.

**COLLEEN**

The story is...

Belle nods.

**COLLEEN**

I'm scared.

**ALEX**

Don't be. We're here.

**COLLEEN**

How could you be Cammie?

Colleen stands up. She walks slowly to Cammie. She crouches to the ground. She reaches toward Cammie's face.

**COLLEEN**

Cammie?

**CAMMIE**

All you have to do is lead him in.

**COLLEEN**

How long have you all been...

**BELLE**

A long time.

**COLLEEN**

"Uncut hair of graves."

**BELLE**

Hm?

**COLLEEN**

Whitman. Grass is the uncut hair of graves.

He's not a bad man.

**ALEX**

But it's better this way. He'll become something beautiful rather than suffer.

**BELLE**

And you will live with a fullness you have never felt.

**COLLEEN**

Will I forget him?

**BELLE**

For a very long time, you'll wish you could. And then one day, you'll have the feeling of wishing but you're not sure what for.

**CAMMIE**

And then one day, the wishing just stops.

Colleen walks to the grave. She puts Sanford inside of it.

She whispers something to him.

She shovels dirt into the grave. She does this again and again.  
It becomes rhythmic.

Cammie drags herself to the grave. She sloughs off her  
peeling skin.

Belle and Alex kneel behind Colleen. They hold hands. Alex  
reaches for Cammie's hand.

Belle nods.

Colleen tires out. She stands up and looks across the way to see a familiar face.

ETERNAL COLLEEN (20s) enters. They share a glance.

Colleen and Eternal Colleen circle each other, reach toward each other, but never touch.

Colleen exits.

Eternal Colleen watches her go. She takes the garden in.

The women take a deep breath.

They sing their opening song, rising and then slowly fading to a whisper.

Complete darkness.

**THE END**

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